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INVISIBLE
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CITY
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From The Director of *Singapore GaGa*

4 Week Sell-Out Run In Singapore
Prix International de la SCAM, Cinema du Reel

A Documentary By Tan Pin Pin



60 minutes, Video, In Mandarin, Japanese & English
English & Chinese subtitles

FURTHER INFORMATION
Tan Pin Pin, Point Pictures
pptan@northwestern.edu
tel +65-98515227

<http://invisiblecity.sg>



“Tender and thoughtful” - Reuters

“Brimming with humanity” Ong Sor Fen, *The Straits Times*

ABOUT INVISIBLE CITY

Invisible City is a documentary about documenteurs. The director interviews photographers, journalists, archaeologists, people propelled by curiosity to find a City for themselves. The documentary conveys how deeply personal their search is and how fragile histories are, hanging on only through their memories and artefacts. Interwoven with the interviews is never seen before footage and photos of Singapore culled from their personal archives. In *Invisible City*, you witness the atrophy of memory, you see a City that could have been.

Invisible City opened in Singapore for a theatrical run on 22 July 2007 where it had a four week sold out run.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

I decided to seek out people who, like me, choose Singapore as the topic of their work. I don't mean where Singapore is the setting for their work, but where Singapore is the main subject. I was curious about whether I was the only person who found this country so interesting, enough to spend most of my professional life making films about its blind spots. I also wanted to thank and show my appreciation to those whose work on Singapore I admired and have benefited from. I sought out photographers, journalists, film directors, archaeologists who were observers and documenteurs of this city, past and present. The result of our interactions is *Invisible City*. It is a documentary about people who looked for a Singapore for themselves, on their own terms. *Invisible City* is about the basic human need to search, to question, to preserve evidence and to share one's discoveries with others. It is about the need to be remembered for what one has seen and experienced. In the end, *Invisible City* documents the fight against the passing of time and the atrophy of memory.

This documentary took nine months to complete. We spent six months editing it. In total 50 hours of footage was shot over 35 days spread over the nine-month period.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

59 minutes, shot on DVcam
In Mandarin, Japanese and English with English and Chinese subtitles
<http://invisiblecity.sg>

SUPPORT

Produced with support from the Pusan International Film Festival, Asian Network of Documentary Fund, Singapore Film Commission, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Institute of Policy Studies, Naresh Mahtani. Mindwasabi. The budget was \$160,000. (US\$100,000)

DIRECTOR'S BIO (BORN SINGAPORE, 1969)

Tan Pin Pin, one of Singapore's best known filmmakers, is the director of *Singapore GaGa*, a groundbreaking documentary about Singapore soundscapes that was voted Best Film of 2006 by the Straits Times. Self distributed it had an unprecedented 7 week sold out run. She also directed *Moving House*, which won multiple awards including the Student Academy Award. Her television documentaries won two Asian Television Awards. Her works screened at Rotterdam, Nantes and at New York's MOMA as well as in museums around the world. She holds an MFA from Northwestern University, USA. *Invisible City* is her second feature documentary.

TAN PIN PIN'S SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

| | |
|---|--|
| 9th August 7min, looped installation, single channel, found footage | Permanent exhibit commissioned by the new National Museum of Singapore for the History Gallery using 40 years of National Day Parade 2006 |
| Singapore GaGa 55 min, documentary, DVCam | Produced by Point Pictures. Voted Best Film 2006, Straits Times, first Singapore documentary to have a cinema release, 7-week run at the Arts House. Distributed by Focus Films (Hong Kong) and Objectifs 2005 (Rotterdam, Nantes, MOMA NYC) |
| 80kmh 38 min, looped installation, DVCam | Part of a 10-year on-going project to culminate in a multi-screen presentation in 2015, 2004 (Aedes Gallery, Berlin, Singapore Art Museum) |
| Crossings: John Woo 50min, documentary, Dbeta | Commissioned by Discovery Networks Asia, produced by Bang Productions, 2004 |
| Afterlife (Series) 30minx5, documentary, DBeta | Commissioned by Discovery Networks Asia, co-produced with VHQ-TV, directed two episodes, also co-series supervisor 2003 (Two Asian TV Awards) |
| Building Dreams (Series) 30minx8, Documentary, DVCam | Commissioned by Arts Central, produced by Xtreme Productions on Singapore architecture. 2002 |
| Moving House 22min, documentary, DVCam | Commissioned by Discovery Networks Asia, first Discovery documentary entirely scripted, directed and produced by a Singapore crew, five international awards 2001 (Student Academy Award, 2002) |
| Rogers Park 11 min, narrative, 16mm | Regional Finalist, Student Academy Award 2001 |
| Microwave 3min, experimental, BetaSP | Toured 30 film festivals 2000 |

CAST



Lim Chen Sian, 32, is known as the “Indiana Jones” of Singapore. One of the four archaeologists in Singapore, he has dug in the Padang, Istana, Kampong Glam and Neil Road.

Chan Cheow Thia, 28, was educated in Singapore and Shanghai, he works in MOE by day. As a key member of civil-society group The Tangent (<http://www.thetangent.org>), he is currently working on an exhibition, *Education At Large*, re-examining extra-curricular life in Singapore from 1945-1965. His columns are also featured regularly in Lianhe Zaobao



Guo Ren Huey, 79, was a member of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Force and fought in the jungles of Pahang, Malaysia during World War II, where he also met his wife. He was in charge of training young recruits. After the war, he went on to work for the Internal Security Department.



Han Tan Juan 65 is a former executive sub-editor and correspondent of Lianhe Zaobao, as well as an eminent cultural researcher. He conducts walking tours around Singapore and gives talks on history. In February 2007 he spoke at a forum organised by The Tangent, recalling his student days in Chung Cheng High and subsequent involvement with politics, leading to his citizenship being revoked in the 1960s.



Izumi Ogura is a journalist for Asahi Shimbun. She was its Southeast Asian Correspondent based in Singapore. She wrote about topics ranging from education policy to Phua Chu Kang. She is now based in Osaka.



Ivan Polunin, 86, is a noted botanist and entomologist who first came to Singapore in the 1950s. He has shot footage for the University of Malaya's Department of Social Medicine as well as for his own documentation. Some of the early colour footage was used by the BBC to make programmes, one of which was called *Paradise in the Mud*, about the Orang Seletar. He retired in 1980 and now spends his time annotating his archive of film and photographs in his home nestled in Hillview estate.



Dr. Marjorie Topley, Ethnographer, Raffles Museum, has researched ghost marriages among Singapore Chinese, sorority marriages in Guangdong, Chinese secret religious sects and economic practices among indigenous rice farmers and immigrant vegetable farmers in Hong Kong's New Territories.



Marjorie Doggett is the author and photographer of *Characters of Light: Early Buildings of Singapore*, which documents many colonial buildings that no longer exist. Originally from England, she has been living in Singapore for more than 50 years. Her late husband, Victor Doggett ran a renowned Piano school. In the 60's she became a Singapore Citizen. She was an active member in the early days of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and she was also active in the early heritage conservation movement in Singapore.

INLAY FOR INVISIBLE CITY

I remember watching *Invisible City* at the Arts House, on the 9th of August 2007. I recall the date because it was also Singapore's National Day, a day to commemorate Singapore's birth as an independent nation-state. At some point in the film, I heard the muffled boom of fireworks, and was seized by a momentary impulse—I wanted to leave the screening room, to gaze, along with my fellow Singaporeans, at a sky ablaze with incandescent patterns.

After watching the film, my friends and I walked out to the smell of smoke still lingering in the air. The spectacle of history is seductive. And yet National Day also marks a moment of trauma, of inconsolable estrangement, when Singapore separated from the Federation of Malaysia.

The elements of an invented ritual—in the form of parades, National Day songs, parachutists, and a waving President—conspire to mask the actual melancholy of the event. As much as the National Day celebrations are an attempt to narrate an official history, they are also about suppressing contesting versions. Fireworks, like expensive orgasms that deflect consciousness, help you to forget.

Tan Pin Pin's fascinating documentary, on the other hand, is an attempt to trace alternative stories that run counter to dominant myths. On the surface, it is a video essay on historiography, about how people construct histories from perishable artifacts and mutable memories. But it is also a metahistorical exercise—Tan herself, as a documentary maker, is complicit in the acts of selection and arrangement that constitute how narratives are shaped.

There are moments when her presence is felt, even by way of absence. Violating expectations for a conventional documentary, Tan has decided not to identify her interviewees through captions. Some photographs are featured without accompanying voiceovers, and at one point, we hear a fractured voice, broken at parts, over a blank screen. Throughout the documentary, one senses the impossibility of reproducing the perfect record—one which could transmit to the present the fullest proof of the past.

But these elliptical maneuvers are not merely self-reflexive tics. The structure of the documentary is arboreal, each one of its subjects an extended branch. As viewers, we are left to ponder on lost opportunities, speculative possibilities. What if a certain branch of our history had not been prematurely pruned? What kind of Singapore would have existed if certain chapters, structures, energies—be they student activists, colonial buildings, hawkers' associations—had not been excised?

Invisible City is not just about the task of remembering—the tedium of brushing soil off shards, the painstaking labeling of film cans—but also the processes of forgetting. Some of these are due to the fallibility of the human mind, and even machines—brows furrow as a subject tries in vain to recall a word, while a malfunctioning voice recorder omits phrases from a commentary.

Yet as Tan demonstrates, there is also willful forgetting: either at a systemic and institutional level, as in the case of Singapore's erasure of the Communist role in the nationalist struggle, to the personal: a Japanese journalist wishes to inform her countrymen of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, yet cannot bear to listen to the details of how they tortured their captives.

Watching *Invisible City*, I was reminded of that crucial difference between remembering and bearing witness. The latter is recollecting in the presence of another.

It is a process in which we can ensure the lifespan of our memories, by seeding them in others. And perhaps, the form of the documentary is the one most suited for the transmission of such testimonies: the burden of remembering, the struggle against entropy, irrelevance and oblivion.

Like Tan's other documentary, *Singapore GaGa, Invisible City* is also a valentine to Singapore—but this time, to the custodians of the city's ephemera. Tan resists easy sentiments such as fatalism or nostalgia, assembling a cast devoted to seeing history as a series of interrupted, unfinished projects. Rather than showing us a pile of broken branches, Tan leads us to the bruised stumps on the bark, still capable of regeneration and life.

Alfian Sa'at
Poet, playwright, and essayist
28 June 2008
Singapore

CREDITS

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY | Tan Pin Pin |
| EDITOR | Inez Ang |
| SCRIPT CONSULTANTS | Tan Siok Siok Jasmine Ng Kin Kia |
| ASSOCIATE PRODUCER | Lim Tiati |
| PHOTOGRAPHY | Ryan Seet Tan Pin Pin |
| ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY | James Teo |
| ADDITIONAL EDITING | Martyn See |
| PRODUCTION SUPPORT | Lian Tsui Yee |
| RESEARCH | Tan Wen Ling |
| EDITING ASSISTANT | Cheryl Koh |
| TRANSCRIBING | Zhang Kang Min Candace Zhou Suryahti Abdul Latiff |
| SOUND DESIGNER | Nigel Woodford |
| COLOURIST | Pang Wei Fong Blackmagic Design |
| GRADING CO-ORDINATOR | Hazel Ngiam |
| GRAPHICS | Elena Ho |
| CHINESE SUBTITLES | Lim Woan Hui Eva Tang |
| Publicity | Suryahti Abdul Latiff |
| Legal Advisor | Alban Tay Mahtani & de Silva |
| Brand Strategy & Marketing | Mindwasabi |

SUPPORTED BY

Singapore Film Commission, Institute of Policy Studies, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Naresh Mahtani, Mindwasabi, Pusan Bank Fund, Pusan International Film Festival

IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Lim Chen Sian
Wee Sheau Theng
Yeo Kang Shua
Chua Ai Hua
Ivan Polunin
Siew Yen Polunin
Han Tan Juan
Chan Cheow Thia
Teng Siao See
Guo Ren Huey
Ho Kit Meng
Izumi Ogura
Ng Chun Kit
Marjorie Topley (Ethnographer)
Marjorie Doggett (Photographer)
Fuwa Tomoko
Koh Tai Ann
Ong Chang Woei

Footage Courtesy of Ivan Polunin
Reproduced with kind assistance from
National Archives of Singapore
Aboriginal footage originally featured in "Paradise in the Mud"

Photographs of Buildings
Published in *Characters of Light: A Guide to the Buildings of Singapore* by Marjorie Doggett
First Published by Donald Moore, 1957
Reprinted by Times Books International, 1985

Photographs of Students during the "5/13 Incident"
Courtesy of The Tangent

LOCATIONS

Fort Serapong, Sentosa Island, Paya Lebar Road, Catholic High School (Old Campus), Waterloo Street, Chung Cheng High School, Goodman Road, Japanese Garden, Jurong, DHL Balloon, North Bridge Road, National Library

MUSIC

"Unity is Strength"
Performed by Han Tan Juan
Music by John William Steffe

"Passion"
Performed by Guo Ren Huey

"Minute Waltz"
Waltz in D flat major, opus 64, No. 1
Composed by Frédéric Chopin

DEATH-DEFYING ACT

Issue 5

In her latest documentary, Singapore GaGa film-maker Tan Pin Pin turns her lens to immortality. Billie Cohen reports

Tan Pin Pin hops lightly out of a cab and shakes my hand. The award-winning local film-maker passes me a DVD of her first film, her student thesis from Northwestern University, *Moving House*, then jumps back into the taxi and speeds off to the editing suite where she's diligently crafting her latest documentary, *Invisible City*. It's no surprise she's so busy; this film, the much-awaited follow-up to 2006's critically acclaimed Singapore GaGa, has to be completed by 19 July, when it will premiere at NUS and then head to the Arts House for a commercial run (22 Jul-12 Aug). When we talk again, this time by phone, she is back at the studio, honing 60 hours of footage into a documentary that won't just deal with her own legacy, but that of everyone in it too. Not that there's any pressure.

What's the focus of your latest film?

Invisible City is primarily about an attempt at immortality.

That's no small feat.

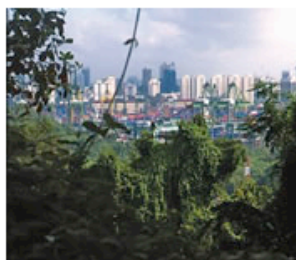
I know, I know. It's actually a film that hits at the basic needs of people. This documentary tracks their journey as they try to ensure, as far as they can, that what they've done, or themselves, isn't forgotten.

You had such colourful characters in Singapore GaGa. How did you find the people for this one?

The way I make a documentary is quite unusual. I just shoot people I find interesting and it's constructed in the editing process. So it started out as a documentary about spaces.

I remember hearing that – it was about sanctuary spaces, right?

Yes, but in the case of Singapore, because things move so fast, spaces become a way to hold memories. So that's how, with that little door open, I stumbled upon people who are trying to sort of entrench their memories into people's minds.



Like who?

One person is a retired medical doctor in his eighties who has 30 hours of footage of Singapore taken in the 1950s. And what's so special is that it's the first colour footage ever taken of this country. Right now he has had two brain operations so his memory is going, but he's trying very hard to annotate these images: time, place, and where and what was taken.

How do you find these people?

I suppose I'm a really curious person, I just go up to people – in the same way that Singapore GaGa was shot. There are personalities that I wanted to meet and know, and as you listen to their stories a lot of other themes open up. I have 60 hours of footage, enough to make three documentaries. But in terms of why these people were chosen, it's simply because I was attracted to the idea of the act of documenting, and how that might relate to immortality [laughs].

Why immortality?

I was trying to find the root of why people take pictures, really. Was there a deeper meaning than just pressing a button on your hand-phone these days?

What'd you find?

I think, on a very basic level, everyone feels that they want to be remembered. So that's why when you travel, you see etchings on the wall like 'I was here' or 'Jason was here'.

You've travelled a lot, do you see that all over the world?

Yeah, all the time. And these little gestures – sometimes they're written in something as banal as a pencil [laughs].

Is this idea of immortality something that has arced through your career?

I suppose it all harks back to why I make films in the first place. As a Singaporean film-maker, there's a very strong sense of the need to be heard – just as all these other people who are featured in the documentary do in their own way. Whether you write your name on the wall or take a photograph, you just want to stake your ground in a rather slippery place.

And who is it you want to be heard by? Singaporeans? The world?

I wanted to find out if other people who also took films or made records felt the same way as I did. So it's not specifically for Singaporeans; it's a lot more general than that. I think it's just in this flowing river of life you want to have a stone that doesn't move for a bit, that you could come back to if you wanted to, and also be found by people who would know where it is.

And this film is your stone?

Yes, exactly. This film is my stone.

Can I backtrack for a bit – why did you call it Singapore GaGa?

I wanted a name that was nonsensical, because Singapore GaGa was a rattlebag of random sounds. And I wanted a title that didn't create too many conceptions, so people went in fresh and not knowing what to expect, and then they're given this impression of Singapore.

That film got so much attention, how did you approach your follow-up? Was there a lot of pressure?

Yeah, there was. And there were many times when I felt that the shadow cast by GaGa was long. But I think everyone goes through this at some point in their careers. And I decided that the only way to deal with it was to do the best I could.

You've had experience with censorship. Your short film, 'Lurve Me Now', was banned here. How did that experience influence your future films?

I don't take anything for granted now. I didn't see it coming at all. That was how naïve I was.

Do you feel that your films are subversive or political?

I think when you make documentary in Singapore...actually I think any independent voice can be considered subversive really. So in that vein, I would say that it is.

What were you trying to do with 'Lurve Me Now'? It was sort of like Barbie porn.

I was just interested in making a fiction film without actors, so it was an experiment to try that out.

Did that experience change how you approached your next projects?

Yeah, I think I expect every film of mine to be banned [chuckles], or not so much banned but not given a rating. But *Invisible City* has got a PG, so I'm extremely pleased.

Ah, you get some cred back from the success of Singapore GaGa?

I think so. I think I've been co-opted into the system [laughs]. But I'm here for the long haul so I'm not interested in being banned. *Invisible City* opens 19 Jul. See Other screenings, The Arts House.



Voices of an Invisible City 29 July 2007

After last Tuesday's screening of *Invisible City* at the Arts House, director Tan Pin Pin answered questions from the audience; the first was about her motivation to make this documentary. Tan wanted to show the hard work, dogged effort and sheer tedium that went into preserving the past - the archaeologist shifting through dirt in Sentosa's Fort Serapong, the former Chinese school student activist recounting about his version of history in the old grounds of Cheung Cheng and Catholic High, the now bedridden photographer of now demolished colonial buildings who self-published her work in a book that has been out of print since 1987, the retired medical researcher re-recording and adding verbal commentary to rare colour footage of an unimaginably rural Singaporean coast in a cluttered, makeshift workshop.

Their work and the film that memorializes their work points to the documentary's Chinese title <<备忘录>>, A record in preparation for/against forgetting - complete with a missing stroke in each character "For those of you who remember your Chinese," she quipped. *audience laughs*). In response to a question about the differences in the English and Chinese titles, Tan said that the Chinese title was, for her, the true title whereas the English one was the best translation she could think of, with connotations of attempting to capture, reveal, evoke the unseen Singapore of the past, present and future.

The triumph of Tan's documentary was to convey how deeply personal such memories, memorializing and histories were, how fragile their existence hung in the minds, words and artifacts of private individuals against the crushing weight of History with the capital H, of The definitiveness of The Singapore Story.

In her review of *Invisible City* in Wednesday's Life!, Ong Sor Fern complained about the lack of captions in the film. Rather more charitably, one of the audience members asked Tan if this was deliberate. It turns out that it was something that she wrestled with for a long time; there would a strong expectation that a film in the documentary genre would have captions, labels to identify the various protagonists and places. Yet she was worried that the captions would distract from listening to what was being said; also she felt that it was hard to do justice to her subjects with succinct labels. I did feel that I benefited from the absence of captions, making me see, hear, think more carefully about each of the very distinctive individuals, their stories and their inter-relations.

Chinese whispers

One such distinct individual was Han Sanyuan, a former Chinese school student activist, who is on a personal quest to tell people about how he feels that the Chinese students of his time were unfairly demonized as Communists. Tan captures him in contrasting moods, of exuberant recollection, recounting epic episodes of our collective history with vividness and passion and also of hesitation and stepping back (mentioned in Xenoboy's post). "Can you censor some parts for me? I might get invited "for tea" (by the ISD, not the PAP recruitment committee)... I had my citizenship revoked, you know."

"History is made by winners but it is also made by the losers; how can you have winners without losers?" Han Sanyuan is a fan of Hegel, quoting a line which says that all that happens in history is in accord with reason, that which is not will disappear. (I do not know whether this is from Hegel's Lectures on the Philosophy of History and would appreciate it if someone could enlighten me.) But he also pointed out how the passion, energy, organization of the Chinese-educated students were a powerful force in ending

British colonial rule. Indeed, in Tan Siok Sun's biography of Goh Keng Swee, she cites a letter written by Lee Kuan Yew on 14 January 1956 which highlighted how "the Chinese-educated were the real force in politics in Singapore." (p.77)

And yet the Chinese-educated were defeated. We were not only defeated but even stepped on. But Han Sanyuan quickly emphasizes that he is not trying to revive an old issue, to rejoin an old battle, he just wants to have his say while he is still able of body and sound of mind. But the enormity of his mission dawns upon him after a talk he gives to members of the public at National Library Board HQ, he despondently recalls how a young student asks him: "什么是马共?" ("What is Ma Gong?" Not realizing that the term is an abbreviation for the Malayan Communist Party.)

But I suppose this cuts both ways. After all, I vaguely recall a Straits Times piece from the dawn of the National Education program where some undergraduates actually thought that Lee Kuan Yew was the Plen. Even those of us who actually have imbibed the Singapore Story of the righteous PAP David overcoming the evil MCP Goliath, the Story seems like the stuff of myth or legend rather than history, given how the latter has been erased from history except as a caricature, the former now Goliath and a line from Shelley: Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!

Because of Invisible City, I have heard these voices, silent all these years, once again as never before.

THE STRAITS TIMES

PEOPLE & POLITICS: TWO FILM-MAKERS, ONE GOAL

You couldn't find two local film-makers more different than Jack Neo and Tan Pin Pin. Mr Neo, 47, is a veteran director with 10 feature films under his belt, including the recent *Just Follow Law*. Irreverent comedy is his instrument. And his grounded understanding of heartland vernacular has made all of his movies blockbusters by local standards. By contrast, Miss Tan, 38, is the leading practitioner of an emerging genre in Singapore: the social documentary. Her first cinematic release, *Singapore Gaga*, captured the music of the cityscape. Her latest project, *Invisible City*, explores the fading and forgotten stories of Singapore's past. Mr Neo's style is energetic and in-your-face. Miss Tan's is subtle and contemplative. But both share common ideals: to engage Singaporeans' minds on issues with the power of the moving image. And despite their differences in style, language and genre, both also share the same objective: they want to chronicle the cultural life of a growing nation, and a society changing rapidly by the second. KEN KWEK and PEH SHING HUEI meet the film-makers.

GUARDED BUT IRREPRESSIBLE: Miss Tan has avoided tackling politics in her works, but believes there must be a place in Singapore for political films.

THE most startling event in local politics for documentary film-maker Tan Pin Pin occurred in 1987 when she was 17.

On May 21 that year, 16 people were arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA). Among them was 40-year-old Catholic church worker Vincent Cheng.

Shortly after his arrest, Cheng appeared on television and confessed to being part of a Marxist plot to overthrow the Government. He was eventually detained for three years under the ISA.

'I was too young to fully understand what was happening, but I saw him on TV and felt a sting,' Miss Tan tells Insight over tea at a Waterloo Street coffee shop.

The impression it left on her was one of how 'the full machinery of the state' could be brought to bear on an individual. And it made her wonder about what recourse to justice the person had, she explains.

The discomfort of witnessing this and what she felt were other politically controversial events in the past 20 years, is part of the reason Miss Tan, now 38, has so far avoided dealing with explicitly political subjects in her films.

In fact, her documentaries are lyrical in nature and her themes, though set in Singapore, are more universal than local.

As in her last documentary in 2005, the critically acclaimed Singapore Gaga, her latest film records Singaporean landscapes and individual testimonies, and eschews broad conclusions about social phenomena or the effects of public policy on society.

Invisible City, which cost \$160,000 and took a year to make, will open at the Arts House on July 22.

The film is a collage of interviews with people who have stories to tell for posterity, but whose narratives are threatened either by social stigma, policy or simply the passage of time.

It is a problem that is urgent in, but not confined to, Singapore, Miss Tan says.

'If you ask, say, the Americans or the British, they would probably say there are certain parts of their history which have been under-represented in the mainstream, and that needs to be addressed.'

These may be oral or 'unofficial' histories, she explains, adding that in Singapore's rapidly changing landscape, the instinct to preserve is as significant as the artefacts, documents and images that are being preserved.

The film does touch on some political matter, such as Japanese war history and alternative accounts of student activism in the Chinese schools of the 1950s. But this, she insists, is incidental.

She continues to be apprehensive about tackling politics head-on in her films, but feels there must be a place in Singapore for such films.

Part of her reservation is fuelled by a concern about censorship, which she experienced when one of her earlier short films, Lurve Me Now, an animated love story, was banned in 1999.

Beyond the silver screen, however, Miss Tan is candid in describing what she regards as the problems of Singapore's 'soft authoritarian' political system, and its longer-term implications.

'There must be a sense of power sharing and debate. The current establishment can't envisage that in a real way because that would be acceding too much control, and worst-case scenarios about the tearing of Singapore's social fabric always come to mind,' she argues.

'But in the long run, diversity might be the only way for Singapore to survive, because I don't think you can entrench a one-party system or ethos beyond another three generations.'

Such views reveal an interest in issues of governance that is guarded but irrepressible.

When asked by Insight if she will ever explore such political issues more explicitly in future projects, the film-maker finally concedes: 'I've not done it for the past two films, but maybe I will for the next one. Just to see what it's like.'

Tan Pin Pin on self-censorship, memories and our views of history

1 Can you describe your latest documentary, *Invisible City*?

It questions what it means to have lived a life. It looks at the things we leave behind and it asks the question: 'If these things fade away or become unavailable, does that mean that the life wasn't lived?' It also looks at the need for some people to ensure that these materials, including their own memory, survive beyond their lives.

2 Is the need to preserve especially acute in Singapore?

There are parts in the film where you get the sense that it is more urgent because in Singapore, there is so much that is churning, changing - of our physical surroundings as well as of our memory and views on history.

3 Can you cite some aspects of Singapore's history that may have been neglected or forgotten?

There are many, and the film touches on a few of the more obvious examples, like parts of the Japanese occupation of Singapore and the experiences of some Chinese-educated student activists in the 1950s, who feel their contributions haven't been accounted for in official history.

Invisible City aims to give you a visceral experience of the atrophy of memories, whether through self-censorship, death or decay of artefacts. And it allows the viewers to muse on how their experience of the present is shaped as much by luck as it is by the efforts of a few preservationists.

4 Your style of film-making is lyrical, and you avoid making overt political statements. Why tiptoe around such issues?

Different topics require different treatments. Maybe my next documentary will be more strident.

In everything I've done so far, I have never gone out to court politics. It is partly to do with my personality. I myself prefer to be persuaded rather than being told if something is right or wrong.

Having said that, I've seen polemical movies that are very, very effective. Staying clear of politics here is also a question of survival for me. I don't want to be banned...I want to make movies for the rest of my life here in Singapore.

5 What can a film-maker do to raise awareness of political issues?

I don't think a film can radically change the way people think about political issues. Film-makers have been ascribed far more influence than we really have.

In the end, our job is to tell a story. And for documentary directors, it is also to keep a record of the present for the future, which is what *Invisible City* strives to do.

But even if we wanted to raise awareness in Singapore, it may be difficult to do. For example, the documentary on (former political detainee) Said Zahari, which I think is essential viewing for all students of modern Singapore history, was banned.

There is also the Films Act, which disallows 'party political' films. But the rule is broad and you don't really know what the limits are.

Filmmaker digs up Singapore's forgotten past
Mon Jul 2, 2007 1:22am EDT

By Wee Sui Lee

SINGAPORE (Reuters) - Faded footage of people in motor-powered sampans flickers and crackles on the screen. Mangrove swamps fill the landscape. It is Singapore in the 1950s.

These flashbacks from a bygone era are seen in "Invisible City", a one-hour documentary featuring people in search of Singapore's past by local filmmaker Tan Pin Pin.

"This film isn't about Singapore per se -- it is about memories, the need to be remembered and what one does to be remembered," Tan, 38, told Reuters in her studio in Little India.

"I think I made a documentary that mourns the passing of time."

The film, which premieres in Singapore on July 19, comes at a time when locals are criticizing the government for wiping out the heritage of the city-state, as British colonial villas and 19th-century Chinese shophouses are razed to make room for development.

Indeed, the sense of loss in the pursuit of progress is a common theme in most of Tan's films.

Many viewers feel that beneath her tender and thoughtful portrayal of Singapore lies a veiled critique of the administration -- something she denies.

But one issue that Tan, a law graduate from Britain's Oxford University, is vocal about is censorship -- a problem affecting many filmmakers here.

One of Tan's films, a three-minute piece called "Lurve Me Now" that explores the fantasies of Barbie dolls, was banned in 1998 by the censors for its sexual references.

In 2005, she represented a group of 10 filmmakers who sought to clarify laws on political films after police questioned the director of a film about an opposition leader.

But Tan said not much has changed since then.

"It's still as untransparent. It has always been and I think it will continue to be."

While Singapore has been trying to encourage a homegrown film and media industry, the city-state's Films Act bars the making and distribution of "party political films" -- an offence punishable with a maximum fine of S\$100,000 (\$65,320) or up to two years in prison.

MELANCHOLIC IMAGE

In a brief preview of "Invisible City" shown exclusively to Reuters, a group of young archaeologists discover an abandoned fort at Sentosa, an island where one of two Singapore's casinos will be located.

In the next scene, Ivan Polunin, the elderly amateur filmmaker who owns the footage -- believed to be Singapore's largest private trove of color footage from the 1950s -- struggles to recall what he captured on film.

Tan's films usually offer viewers a melancholic image of Singapore, vastly different from the government's picture-perfect version of sanitized streets and sparkling buildings.

"Some people see my films as a window into Singapore. I want to take them to places where they've never been to -- literally and emotionally," she said.

Tan's latest documentary, the critically acclaimed "Singapore GaGa", featured an elderly busker, a woman in a wheelchair selling packets of tissue paper, and avant-garde Singapore pianist Margaret Tan performing on her trademark toy pianos in a public housing block.

Tan, who had "wanted to leave so badly" when she was younger, said she is staying put as Singapore still inspires her.

"My material is all here, I'm not interested in being a diasporic director. This place resonates for me."

For more details on the film: <http://www.invisiblecity.sg/>

(\$1=1.531 Singapore dollar)